OUR PART OF THE BARGAIN

March 6, 1988, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Scripture
Mark 12:28-34
Exodus 20:1-17

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength... and your neighbor as yourself. -Mark 12:30-31

The object of my desire was a 1938 Buick. We discovered it when we broke the window of the garage in which it sat. There were four of us, sixteen years old. We were playing basketball. A pass went astray, straight through the window - and there it was. In the subsequent negotiations with the elderly gentleman whose garage window we had broken, and in the process of replacing the window, we saw it up close. It had seen better days, but it could easily be put in running condition. He would sell it to us, he said, for $100... if we would just push it out of the garage. We were ecstatic. Twenty-five dollars a piece! A car! Freedom! Life! Gorgeous vistas of possibility suddenly opened to us.

It never occurred to me that anyone with an ounce of intelligence, particularly one who cared about my welfare and happiness, would fail to see the wonderful bargain and the wise economic sense this new opportunity made. Well, someone did - at the dinner table that night, with some finality. "No," he said, "you can't buy the car." "Why not?" I asked. "Because" the answer came, "four people can't own anything together. You can't afford the insurance. Do you know what one tire costs? Can you change a tire?" I believe the conclusion was something like - "Because I said so, that's why."

Now that decision, I see in retrospect, was made because my father cared about me and loved me. It was, therefore, a fairly life-giving decision. I did not like it at the time. Not at all. I thought my autonomy, my freedom, had been severely curtailed. I was hurt and angry.

If you are fortunate, you had a parent or parents who loved you enough to say "no," to set limits; and therefore to create structure in which your life could be nurtured and survive - even grow. It took two psychologists, David and Phyllis York, and their concept of "Tough Love," to remind a generation of increasingly indulgent parents that real love sets limits. I'll not forget a psychiatrist friend of mine who used to address parents of teen-agers on the topic of alcohol and drugs. He would always say, "You professional people have to learn to love your children

enough to risk being disliked by them. You all feel guilty about how little time you spend with them. You know your parental deficiencies too thoroughly, and you have a hard time making decisions that will make your children unhappy."

Love means the strength to say "no" at strategic times. In that "no" an important "yes" is said; a loving affirmation which we will understand and appreciate years later. It is not easy to love like that. In many ways it is easier never to say "no."

For several weeks we have been looking at the idea of the Covenant. It is the foundational idea of our religion. God not only creates - God is committed and involved in creation. God creates a people - then makes promises to those people. This morning that story of God and the Covenant comes to the wilderness of Sinai and Moses and the Ten Commandments. At the outset, it is a parent God, setting the limits, saying a strategic "no" - so that the people will live.

I believe it was one of those wonderful New Yorker cartoons which showed a group of Israeli Army officers around a map-strewn table in the Situation Room. One of them says, looking wistfully at the map, "Just think: if Moses had turned right instead of left, we'd have the oil and they'd have the Ten Commandments." That's not as amusing as it used to be, given the tragedy now being played out between Israel and its neighbors. In fact, a cartoon in the Tribune yesterday - showed Moses coming down from Sinai with the two tablets and his saying - "He didn't tell us what to do with the Palestinians." The terrible tragedy is that God did. It's all there - a way to live in peace and harmony and justice. We're not in a very strong moral position to be critical, but the simple fact is that Israel isn't being true to the best and highest ideals of its own law.

In any event, the Covenant has not always felt like a blessing... In Joseph Heller's irreverent novel, God Knows, King David complains... "'I'll give you laws,' said God. 'I've got laws to give you that you have never heard before...' That's what he promised and that's all he gave us, along with a complicated set of dietary rules that have not made life any easier. To the goyim he gives bacon, sweet pork, juicy sirloin and rare prime ribs of beef. To us he gives a pastrami. In Egypt we get the fat of the land. In Leviticus he prohibits us from eating it."

The historical situation is this. The Hebrew tribes, living and thriving in Egypt, but pressed into a kind of forced labor, have suddenly found themselves on the way out of Egypt. Led by Moses, they narrowly escape the armies of Pharaoh at a swampy tidal basin known as the Sea of Reeds. Now they are free, but lost, facing a barren and frightening desert wilderness. After three months of wandering they make camp at the base of a mountain called Sinai. There the loose-knit tribes become a nation.

What creates a nation - actually gives life to the people - is the Covenant. Whispered first, back on the edges of history and remembered in the old stories they told around their campfires as they walked... Stories about Noah and God's promise, about Sarah and Abraham and God's promise of descendants and land, and the enigmatic commitment that God will be God to

those descendants. And now Moses is telling them that God has not forgotten them, has remembered the promises, and has liberated them from their captivity. The Covenant is remembered and renewed at Sinai - and significantly amplified. Now the people of the Covenant, on the way to becoming a nation, are given a law: ten principles upon which God's people can live into the future.

Time has honored these Ten Commandments. Historians tell us that no civilization survives for long without something like them.

This legal code is significantly different, however, in the way it begins. The prologue, instead of a legal abstraction, sets out to tell who God is and what God has done: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt. Therefore you shall have no other gods... honor your parents... you shall not steal or kill."

That is the genius of our religion, the common theological ground on which Jews and Christians stand. God acts. God's people respond. It is the rhythm of grace. It is the most revolutionary idea in the history of religious ideas. Religion is not the way to persuade God to love. Religion - the whole system of it - is the way we respond to grace which has already been given.

The Ten Commandments, or moral principles, fall into two clear categories: those which have to do with an individual's relationship with God, and those which have to do with human relationships, life in community. Piety and Justice. That is our secondary genius: the welding together of personal religion and social or political religion. From its genesis, our faith is equal tension: a person's relationship with God - piety - and that person's relationship with the neighbor, the sojourner, the widow, the orphan - call that justice. The temptation is always to forget the latter, to allow religion to focus on one's walk with God. And whenever that balance is tipped, the prophets of Israel remind the people of the ancient tension. Amos growled:

> "I hate - I despise your feasts,
> and I take no delight in your
> solemn assemblies...
> But let justice roll down like waters..."

It is a reminder God's people have needed in every generation.

The other thing that happens to the law - besides getting out of balance - is that the great moral principles in it become a long list of not-so-great rules and regulations. Morality is always being reduced to moralisms. So before long, Israel not only has a great and life-giving moral principle about observing a Sabbath, now it has hundreds of regulations, scrolls full of rules about what to do and what not to do on the Sabbath.

That fractures the rhythm of grace so that we begin to think that instead of living lives of endless gratitude for God's goodness, we must devise ways to get on God's side, to accumulate some assets on the heavenly ledger. And at that point grace is gone, so is joy and freedom; morality

has become moralism; the Covenant has become legalism and religion has become lifeless, joyless and loveless. Living a good life out of profound gratitude to God has been replaced by living a good life in order to please God, get ahead, make a place in heaven. There is a very significant difference between the two.

William Sloane Coffin, musing about the fact that Christians seem to enjoy nothing so much as deciding who isn't going to get into the Kingdom, says that legalism "turns people who could be free and loving into mean little Puritans, blue-nosed busybodies, passing judgment on others instead of themselves being just." [The Courage to Love, p. 14]

Enter Jesus. One day a lawyer asked him, "Teacher, what is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus knew the content of Exodus 20. He could recite the Ten Commandments. The lawyer knew that he knew. Jesus also knew that the question itself reflected a distorted view of covenant morality... So he answered in a very interesting way. He took those ten great moral principles which gave life to Israel and he recast them.

The five commandments which have to do with an individual's relationship with God come out - "Love God with heart, soul, mind and strength." The five commandments which regulate the relationship between people come out. "Love your neighbor as yourself." (see Leviticus 19:18)

Faithfulness is not a negative moralism but a positive, outgoing love for God and for other people.

The value crisis of our time, everyone agrees, is not adequately described as more people doing more bad things. Rather, the moral dilemma of the 80s is seen as a profound self-centeredness. Christopher Lasch called it "the New Narcissism" and Tom Wolfe the "Me Generation." The individual has become the arbiter of morality. "If it feels good do it." Economically, if it makes a profit, do it... Greed is in.

A Tribune feature last week described the universal lack of enthusiasm for courses in ethics at the business schools, put it bluntly - "Teaching ethics to students cannot alter the facts of business practice. In a capitalistic system, greed is the main fuel that drives the engine. Ethics work against greed. Business is not inherently immoral, but it is amoral. For virtually all decisions, ethics are irrelevant." [Chicago Tribune, "Ethics Training or Not, Business Will Be Business," Section 1, p. 13, 2/29/88]

That is a caricature to be sure. Not all business people think like that. In fact, many business people combine a sense of community responsibility and ethical integrity with business success. But, that is not always popular. Greed currently is in: Insider Trading, bribes to high government officials, privileged information, lobbying by former White House aides. Obviously, there is a value system at work here which is at least very different from the one we assumed was in place.

Religiously - I think that when the history of this era is written, it will be clear that our culture's narcissism found theological expression as well. "Feel good" religion is the theological equivalent of "if it

feels good do it." Howard Rice writes, "People who claim to have had an experience of Christ which only makes them feel wonderful, full of goose bumps and happy, may be imagining a Christ of their own making." [Morton Kelsey, Resurrection, Epilogue by Howard Rice, p. 192]

The real test of a religious experience, Rice says, is what it does for the person who had it. "If it leads to permanent withdrawal or disinterest in the world and other people it is highly suspect. If it leads to radical love for others and a willingness to risk in their behalf -- it has met the test of authenticity." [Ibid, p. 184]

This very old idea - God's ancient Covenant - gathers together the human quest for the infinite, the human hunger and thirst for the holy, and the mundane necessities of living together in the world with peace, compassion, hope, and justice. Jesus took the upward thrust of the human spirit and insisted that it move horizontally as well. God's purpose, from the beginning, is a creation in which holiness is worshiped, and justice is practiced. And, in fact, this horizontal thrust, this relational religion is life-giving. If we miss this part, we miss the energy of our faith.

One of the most popular and important books of the decade is M. Scott Peck's, The Road Less Traveled. In the midst of the "Me Generation," Peck struck a responsive chord by reminding us of the psychological and sociological truth of some ideas that sound strikingly biblical. Love, M. Scott Peck wrote, is not a feeling but an activity. Genuine love implies commitment - the principle form that love takes is attention. When we love another we give him or her our attention.

That's what Christianity means by morality... not avoiding wrong so much as doing right; not keeping our hands clean by never touching the morally ambiguous so much as rolling up our sleeves and doing the work of compassion and justice in the world. Think for a moment about the incredible dilemma teen-age pregnancy has become. Unwed, teen-age pregnancy is no longer an exception. It is the norm within the culture of poverty. Studies keep telling us that American teen-agers are no more or less sexually active than their European counterparts. But they get pregnant at exactly twice the rate. Why? Because they either don't know how not to, or don't have access to birth control information and assistance. "Just say no," may be emotionally satisfying as a slogan. But it misses utterly the simple realities of a fourteen-year-old living in Cabrini-Green. Christian morality (loving thy neighbor) means taking that young person very seriously.

Corporately - as a church - it means we have work to do in our world, our city, our neighborhood. By God's grace and your support we get some of it done. Last week, one of the neighbors Jesus ordered us to love, died. We were his family. He came to the Social Service Center regularly for food, clothing, to get out of the cold, to talk to someone who would - in Peck's vivid metaphor - give him some attention. He died in Washington Park one night last week. The Social Service Center contacted his out-of-town relatives and saw that he was buried. We do that - because our Lord taught us that it is the way to love God... And we will continue to do it. We will, in the name of the one who said morality is measured by love and justice among the neighbors. We will continue to ask the embarrassing

questions of - Why he was in the park and not in a shelter... Why this culture, which can afford a 600 ship Navy, can't take care of the least of its citizens.

And so - the ancient Covenant - comes to us as challenge; not as moralism and certainly not as an abstraction; but very specifically in terms of the people you and are called to love... The neighbor, Jesus indicated - with elegant simplicity - is that person who needs you... needs your attention.

It is your spouse... It is your child... It is the one whose very being you have been taking for granted. It is your parent... your aging aunt... It is your friend to whom you have not been listening... It is your brother in another city who simply needs to know you are here...

And it is the sojourner - the homeless man or woman... the welfare child... the AIDS victim... It is the bruised and battered and forgotten...

The Covenant is challenge to love God by attending to these neighbors... And the miracle is, that in the loving hands of Jesus, this strenuous challenge becomes - miraculously - the gentle grace-filled Gospel.

The command to love thy neighbor is our part of the bargain. It is also, mysteriously, a gift of life.

M. Scott Peck put it simply, eloquently and in a way I continue to experience:

> "When I genuinely love I am extending
> myself and I am growing. The more I
> love, the longer I love, the larger
> I become. Genuine love is self-replenishing." [Ibid, p. 160]

Bill Coffin, quoting the philosopher Descartes: "Cogito ergo sum. I think, therefore I am," said recently that that's nonsense! "Amo ergo sum. I love, therefore I am." [op. cit., p. 35]

The Covenant promise is that God will be God to us. God's son came among us that we might live fully, freely, and joyfully. How sad to miss that. How sad to be so close to it and not see it... the great moral principle: the key to salvation.

"You shall love the Lord your God," he said, "with all your heart, soul, mind and strength - and - your neighbor as yourself."

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Teach us to live, O God, as your free and whole and joyful children. Call us to account. Love us even in our disobedience, resentment and selfishness. And teach us, over and over, that our salvation is to love as we have been loved - in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.